

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

A sermon preached at the High Mass in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Sunday, 14 January 2023, by The Venerable Canon Morag Ellis KC, Dean of the Arches and Auditor, Licensed Lay Minister at St Paul's Cathedral and St Albright's, Stanway

A couple of years ago, our family were in the throes of preparing for the marriage of our daughter Ilona to George. One of the most enjoyable tasks was a series of blind tastings to choose the wine for the reception, which was the very generous gift of George's parents, Nigel and Jenny. We spent some extremely jolly evenings trying the contents of unknown bottles, their labels hidden with covers, making notes, giving scores, and choosing the winners. After all this effort to choose the best wines for the occasion, one day, a supermarket delivery of plonk arrived at our house, which Nigel had ordered as a reserve, just in case the wine ran out. We all thought of this passage from St John's Gospel and laughed, and Nigel subsequently read this passage at the marriage service. (In fact, the good wine did not run out and we are still drinking it up on special occasions – we had some this Christmas).

In telling that story, I used everyone's names, because the point of the story was what all of us did. It is a source of amusement to our family and, I hope, to you, but it has no deeper meaning. Although the subject matter is superficially similar, my telling of this story could not be more different from the biblical account of the wedding in Cana of Galilee.

What is the one thing that we are not told about that party? The names of the couple or their families. Why not? Simply, because their names were not important for the gospel writer. The second chapter of John's Gospel does not begin with some lightweight wedding anecdote. The whole gospel, including this passage, is a complex spiritual masterpiece with many different layers of meaning, written to be understood by people, probably already Christians, of Jewish background and those with a Greek – that is, Gentile – frame of cultural reference. Clement of Alexandria, writing in the second half of the first century A.D., said:

'Last of all' (i.e. after the other three gospels) 'John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the gospel, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the spirit, composed a spiritual gospel.'

In the next few minutes, I will offer you a 'tasting' of some of the hidden meanings which commentators have discerned in the passage. But, as always when we study the Bible, it is not a dry academic exercise, because we are seeking to learn more about God, and this gospel has been set in the Church's lectionary for today because we are still in the season of Epiphany, when we reflect on the manifestation - the showing forth - of God in the person of Jesus Christ. As we shall see, the author helps us to reflect on where Jesus had come from and where He was going in this *'the first of*

his signs’ which *‘revealed his glory*’ such that *‘his*’ newly assembled *disciples believed in him.*’

So here goes with the ‘tasting notes’

Provenance

The account is set within Jewish culture – a small town wedding celebration. The *‘third day*’ in the opening words is calculated from the events which we have read about in the preceding chapter, when John the Baptist announced Jesus as the Lamb of God who has come to take away sin, and the disciples gathered around Jesus. Scholars have worked out that this brings the date of the wedding to a Wednesday, which was the traditional day for the wedding of a young girl in Jewish religious custom. The six stone water jars in which the miracle takes place also speak of Jewish tradition – there were elaborate washing rituals associated with eating, and these jars would have held gallons of water which had already been used up, as they were empty. Some commentators have even seen a reference to the Jewish religion in which Jesus was raised in the reference to ‘the mother of Jesus’ being there – representing the Judaism which gave Him birth. Of course, for Christians, the presence of Mary has much deeper significance, of which more anon.

Flavour

The central ‘flavour’, or important spiritual message, in the story is the focus on Jesus, at the expense of the town’s newest husband. Jesus is the real bridegroom and this interpretation links in with material in the other gospels. In particular, in Matthew’s Gospel¹, Jesus is rebuked by the Pharisees for the failure of His disciples to fast, and He says:

‘Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?...The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.’

In the Old Testament, Israel is sometimes seen as the bride of God whom He is calling back to Himself through the prophets. This story is placed in the gospel just after Jesus has called His disciples, and we are told that they were also at the wedding breakfast. The central truth is that God is there, among His people, fulfilling them and wildly exceeding their expectations with His power and generosity.

The failure of the wine and the emptiness of the water jars are connected. The message is that the old religion and its rituals have run out, dried up and are no longer operating as a vessel for God’s activity in the world but that Jesus can and will, *‘when his hour comes*’, offer the new wine of His blood through His sacrifice on the Cross. The reference to the ‘third day’, as well as pointing back to the events of the previous chapter, also alludes to the triumph of the Resurrection. Christian readers would have understood – and still understand – these references to point to the Mass, when we drink the wine in communion with God, a foretaste of the banquet of Heaven. One detail in the original Greek text is that the word used for the *‘servants*’ is, unusually,

¹ Matthew 9:15; Luke 5:33-5.

the same as the Greek word for 'deacon'. These '*servants*', we are told, knew where the new wine had come from, which so intrigued the steward of the feast. Deacons were and are servant ministers of the Eucharist, with particular liturgical roles to perform, such as announcing the peace of Christ and the dismissal after the celebration. This language confirms that we are to understand the '*sign*' in Eucharistic terms as manifesting God's saving purposes in Jesus Christ and showing that God acts collaboratively with His servants, coming to us in sacramental form through the ministry of His Church.

Top Notes

Wine buffs, and the blurb you sometimes find on wine labels, talk about all sorts of mysterious-sounding things, including 'top notes'. They often seem to involve unlikely ingredients such as blackcurrants, peaches and strawberries, and adjectives such as 'lively', 'frisky' and 'piquant'. I think the point is to describe any distinctive tastes which really bring the wine alive. There are a few of these in the wedding at Cana story, and I will mention a couple of them which are important and linked.

The first is the role of Jesus' mother. I have mentioned the fact that some writers have seen these references as harking back to Jesus' birth tradition of Judaism, but, for me, she seems to be a very real and down to earth presence in the story. She knows that her son is special and something prompts her to play the 'proud mother' that day – egging Him on to demonstrate who He is by doing something amazing. In Luke's Gospel, Mary knows, from conception onwards, something of her son's significance and, in traditional Marian devotion, this incident is seen as evidence of how in tune Mary was with God's will – she points to Jesus, creates the platform on which He can demonstrate to His disciples and, through them, to us, who He is and what He has come to do.

The second is the conversation between them, which sounds odd or even harsh. Whilst nowadays it is rude to address someone as 'woman', this was conventional for the time, but the apparent distancing is curious – "*What have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come.*" The reference by Jesus to "*his hour*" reminds Christians of the "*hour*" to which Jesus refers several times in the gospel's account of His preparation of the disciples for the events of Good Friday and Easter at the time of the Last Supper.² There is an apparent tension in the exchange with His mother, which is very moving; as a good parent, she is prodding Him towards His destiny, to the fulfilment of the ministry upon which He is just embarking, but He is perhaps feeling a human reluctance which He can only express to her, His closest confidante. The abundance which God wills through Christ will come at a cost which He possibly sees more clearly than her at this point. Mary then drops out of John's Gospel until the crucifixion, where Jesus addresses her again as "*Woman*", entrusting her to the "*disciple whom he loved*", traditionally regarded as the author of this gospel.

The Tasters

² The Farewell Discourses: John 13:1; 17:1.

True wine tasters, the people who do it for a living, go through several steps, often described as: see, swirl, sniff, sip, and savour. And then they act on what they experience – advising a supermarket chain which wines to buy for immediate sale or a collector which wines to lay down as an investment.

How might we respond to this gospel story?

Psalm 34 commands us to “*taste and see how gracious the Lord is*”. We can “*taste*” the Bible by making time to read it, study it, read about it, discuss it with others and think about it deeply, looking for its richly textured meanings rather than skim reading its apparently simple, well-known words. We should seek to “*read, mark, learn and inwardly digest*” the Scriptures (in the words of the Book of Common Prayer).

We can “*taste*” God’s love in the Eucharist. On one level, the story of the wedding at Cana is very human, very physical – it is about wine, water, celebration, a shared meal, relationships with other people, and the need for spiritual fulfilment in our lives. We need God’s presence, and the Mass provides for us in a way that transcends the intellect – God is always there for us, irrespective of who we are, what we are, or how we happen to be feeling. The Eucharistic meal is a joint activity, something which is a shared manifestation of God’s presence in the world. So we need to join in with this celebration in faith, as the gathered Christian community on earth.

God invites us to share in the celebration of Christ’s saving love for the world and, fed by Him, to take that love to others. This is what it means to be the living church, a community of believers joining together to worship God, to receive His feeding. We need to keep doing this, so that we do not become like the empty, dried-up water jars; God gives us the means to stay fresh and alive through the words of the Bible and the elements of the Eucharist, to build one another up and to go out and serve those around us. AMEN.